WEST GERMANY

Of Suicide and Espionage

The darkroom assistant in Dancker's photo shop in Bonn could hardly believe his eyes. Among banal vacation snapshots on a strip of film taken from a Minox camera were nine pictures of NATO documents clearly marked "Top Secret" and "Secret." It took police and the West German Counter Espionage Service four days to identify the owner of the film. He proved to be Rear Admiral Hermann Lüdke, formerly deputy chief (early 1966 to mid-1967) of the logistics section of SHAPE, NATO's European command, who was on the eve of his retirement from the service.

Lüdke had held a CTS (Cosmic Top Secret) clearance in the SHAPE job and knew the most sensitive details of NATO logistics: the capacities of European ports, transport, defense industries; the location of nuclear weapons depots and ordnance stockpiles of the NATO armies, virtually down to the number of available artillery rounds. The photos suggested that he might be transmitting secrets to NATO's enemies.

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REAR ADMIRAL LÜDKE
Beginning of an astonishing wave.

Feted with Champagne. Lüdke, 57, a handsome, gregarious man, was not told of the suspicions against him until three days before he left the navy. The occasion was a champagne luncheon feting his retirement. After a laudatory farewell speech by Defense Minister Gerhard Schröder, Vice Admiral Gert Jeschonnek, the chief of the navy, and a counterespionage man took Lüdke aside to question him. The admiral at first lamely explained that someone must have stolen the Minox to take the pictures. However, he later changed his story to claim that he wanted the documents for his memoirs. If so, they would surely have ranked among the dullest ever written, since the documents were merely directives for handling supplies. Nevertheless, he was allowed to go home and was interrogated only the next day. Because West German counterspies apparently take weekends off, two more days elapsed before the federal attorney's office in Karlsruhe, which investigates and prosecutes treason, was informed of the case.* It took over the investigation, but unfortunately it did not stick close enough to the admiral.

On Oct. 8, Lüdke was found dead on a friend's hunting preserve near Trier in the Eifel Mountains, a fist-sized wound in his chest, his Mauser rifle, loaded with dumdum rounds, across his legs. Accident? Lüdke was an avid hunter and too experienced a rifleman. Suicide? The Trier district attorney's office thought so, but it did not rule out murder. There was nothing in Lüdke's record to indicate a likelihood of treason, but the federal prosecutor's office left open the possibility that he had spied for a foreign power.

Weakest Link. Most Germans are fairly inured to espionage cases. Their country, with an estimated 6,000 foreign agents operating inside its borders, has long been considered NATO's weakest security link. But even the most cynical were soon fascinated, for Lüdke's death marked the beginning of an astonishing wave of suicides among government officials. On the day of Lüdke's death, Major General Horst Wendland, 56, deputy chief of the Federal Intelligence Service, Bonn's equivalent of the CIA, shot himself in his office. The government explanation: he was despondent over an "incurable depressive illness." On Oct. 15, a promising young official in the Economics Ministry hanged himself. On Oct. 16, a woman working in the Federal Press and Information Office took a fatal overdose of drugs. On Oct. 18, Bundeswehr Lieut. Colonel Johannes Grimm, 54, working in the Alarm and Mobilization Section of the Defense Ministry, shot himself. He, too, said the government, was despondent over an incurable disease. On Oct. 23, it was announced that a senior clerk in the Defense Ministry had disappeared after leaving a suicide note.

In each case, there were personal explanations for the death, but security officials did not rule out other motives, even though only Lüdke, Wendland and Grimm had had access to classified information. One line of speculation suggested that extensive security checks launched in sensitive departments after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia might have frightened enemy agents into suicide. Bonn admitted last week that toward the beginning of October, after one East German agent had been arrested, six others fled West Germany. But it did not tie them to the admiral. By week's end the Lüdke case remained open—and with it lingered the specter of a major and painful espionage scandal.

* In May 1951, [illegible] for the English weekend by the British authorities enabled Spy Donald Maclean to escape to the Soviet Union.